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AUTHOR Barton, Robert
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ABSTRACT

A survey of approximately 450 novice Shakespearean actors was undertaken to determine what could be learned from a careful study of the initiation of new performers acting Shakespeare that might be helpful to others. The findings revealed that the typical initiate perceives acting Shakespeare as different from other acting, indicates a definite belief that knowledge of verse is essential (but usually can't explain iambic pentameter correctly), feels that voice is the most significant element, and has a moderately paranoid attitude toward British actors. In addition, it was discovered that at the end of the first experience, most performers saw the task as demanding more energy and work than they had anticipated. The results suggest that the performer who can be both spiritual and earthy will be best suited to perform Shakespeare. (Emphasizing the similarities between Shakespearean plays and American musicals is noted as a technique to aid actors in performing and a game called "Shakespeare Country," in which the actors engage in conversation about contemporary topics using Shakespearean phrases and language style during rehearsal time, is suggested to make the language seem more real to the cast.) (MKM)

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STRUTTING AND FRETTING

Shakespeare and the Novice Actor

Robert Barton

Theatre Division
Department of Communication Arts and Theatre
University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742

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The actor is probably the most neglected subject in the massive galaxy of Shakespearean research. The novice actor is certainly the most neglected category in the small body of literature on performing Shakespeare. This negligence seems particularly ironic since the actor is the essential final link between script and audience, and the novice (given the commitment of most schools to perform Shakespeare every one to four seasons) is the actor most frequently seen attempting this connection.

Every year a huge number of young, untrained performers make their Shakespearean debuts with little in their backgrounds or immediate environments to prepare them for the task. Armed with course work and production experience generally tied to contemporary realistic theatre, the novice is suddenly confronted with verse drama, almost four hundred years old, bathed in a pervasive aura of consensual reverence only a few levels down from that reserved for the Bible. His school library will be packed with Shakespearean volumes from dramatic structure to apocrypha, but almost nothing designed to aid him in the responsibility of acting the creations of the world's most revered playwright.

After a survey of works in print, my rough conclusion is that well under 2% of published material in any way focuses on the task of the actor, of realizing in performance what appears on paper. Most of what does exist requires considerable experience, training, education, and exposure simply to be comprehensible, whether it then proves <u>useful</u> or not.

It is, I feel, important to point out that there are a number of highly misleading titles on the market and on library shelves.

Most conspicuous, but by no means solitary, is Bertram Joseph's Acting Shakespeare. I have personally known perhaps 50 or 60 actors who ravenously tackled this valuable, insightful but flagrantly mistitled volume in the hopes of performance guidance, only to find (if they were not turned off by the manuscript's structural and semantic density) that they were essentially encountering a scholarly argument for formalized acting with absolutely no suggestions (by the author's own admission) for actualizing these concepts. The problem with the packaging and promotion of such works, is that actors, who often reluctantly turn to the library or bookstore for assistance in characterization anyway, may, as the result of one disillusioning venture, never again move beyond the script itself to benefit from the printed perceptions of others who have struggled with their roles before them.

Shakespeare does not appear to be a writer much concerned with literary criticism (Polonius is about the only character to indulge in it) but clearly concerned with the strutting and fretting of players. I believe he would find the heavily weighted bookshelf percentages dissapointing.

There is additional quantitative evidence for this concern. Until recently, Theatre Journal surveyed ATA member schools to determine Most Produced Playwrights. Response was large enough to estimate beyond the sample to the approximately 3,000 schools offering theatre training in the U.S. The winner every year was Shakespeare receiving at least twice (and often three times) as many productions as any other writer. This could easily mean that in any given season there are at least 20,000 young actors battling the Bard's blank verse, most for the first time. Other statistics

from additional amateur and community theatres would probably make the above estimate conservative.

One might argue in favor of a close study of novices tackling Aeschylus or Sheridan or any other infrequently produced pre-modern writer, but with Shakespeare, there is an already existing army of performers, constantly renewing itself, always visible, but unexplored. We know little about its ranks. Most focused in the spotlight and least focused in research, a member of this brotherhood frequently struts and frets and then is heard no more. His debut is often his swan song.

What kinds of predispositions does the typical novice carry into and out of the experience? What has he read and thought and felt about Shakespeare? What are his major choices involving use of rehearsal time, preparation and analysis? What changes take place during his exposure? What advice would he pass on? Is there heuristic potential for other actors who follow him?

The research I am going to report to you today begins with the question: "What information can be gained from a careful study of the initiation of some performers into acting Shakespeare, which might aid the initiation of others?" The shared experience of some could ease all stages of rehearsal for others.

The investigation began as my dissertation which surveyed approximately 130 actors in three Shakespearean productions. While the results were provocative and <u>potentially</u> heuristic, I had reservations regarding the generalizability of data accumulated from subjects residing in the same small midwestern college town and involved in three of Shakespeare's best known tragedies. During the two years since the initial research, I have replicated

the study at metropolitan universities, suburban junior colleges, community theatres, various apprentice programs connected with LORT circuit companies, and even a dinner theatre. Titles now include Shakespeare's comedies, histories, and romances. Results with each replication have been nearly identical and subjects now approach 450 in number. The following profiles and conjectures regarding the "typical" initiate into Shakespearean performance, seem, therefore, relatively generalizable.

Six methods of investigation were employed: First, a sampling of 30 full company members of eight U.S. Shakespeare Festivals (all of whom had performed in at least 20 Shakespeares) were sought out as an "Expert" pool of subjects whose responses could be compared with those of the novices to gain a sense of perspective. Experts were examined through interviews and questionnaires. Novices filled out lengthy pretest questionnaires at auditions and post-test forms after final performances. Novices were also observed unobtrusively during tryouts, rehearsal, and production, and many were interviewed during the month following performance.

The investigation's catholic nature produced, I believe, a large range of useful rehearsal insights for directors and actors, far more than could be reasonably shared with you in this short session. Most were shared perceptions or "helpful hints" sprinkled through-out the data and almost impossible to readily categorize. I will attempt to touch only the broadest outlines so a number of conclusions I share with you today will strike you as sweeping generalizations. I am, for purposes of economy summarizing material more accurately reported and scrutinized through actual percentages, graphs, tables, and charts. As with all field studies conducted

without a body of precedent literature, theoretical base or research models, there is vast potential for the presence of extraneous variables. Given these acknowledged limitations, let me share with you some results and implications.

An actor seems likely to wait until he has appeared in an average of five non-Shakespearean productions before he even auditions for the first time to play in the Bard's work (so that he is a neophyte to Shakespeare but not to acting in general). He has read no more than four Shakespearean scripts, may well have never seen a live production, and has probably experienced no film treatments beyond the Zeferelli "Romeo and Juliet" and the Olivier or Burton "Hamlet". In spite of this brief contact, he carries strong predispositions along with an abiding fear that all the other actors have read, seen, and studied more than he.

He perceives Acting Shakespeare as most certainly different from other acting but has difficulty describing <u>how</u>, except for the general impression that it is more difficult. While he claims not to believe the British to be superior performers of Shakespeare, when asked to select five actors whom he would imagine appropriately cast in Shakespeare's plays, choices are almost invariably British and experienced in stage performance. When asked to pick inappropriate or unsuitable actors, they are without exception American film and television stars. The big winners in these categories, incidentally, are usually Laurence Olivier and Glenda Jackson and the big losers John Wayne and Carol Burnnet.

He indicates a definite belief that knowledge of verse is essential to successful performance but is usually unable to define

iambic pentameter and (even when answering anonymously), as often as not, will offer an incorrect explanation rather than an admission of ignorance.

He seems to feel that voice is the most significant element in determining proficiency with Shakespeare, since it is the single most listed quality when each subject describes what is right or wrong about himself or others for performing Shakespeare. Other single words appearing most frequently as pluses are: versatility, presence, class, boldness, experience, intelligence, energy, depth, grace and style. Minuses include: too rough, too contemporary, too tacky, shallow, imperceptive, unvaried, insensitive, rough, ethnic, comic, or weak.

The moderately paranoid attitude towards Britain and the Bard carries into his behavior at auditions and rehearsals where, in an attempt at the essential precision, clarity, and assertiveness of speech, he would often come up with something less like "Standard Stage Speech" and more like a phoney English accent. Other frequently observed rehearsal difficulties included small, close-to-the-body gestural patterns, posture problems, an overall failure to "center" and "present" almost as if a vocal awareness (or self-consciousness) had totally superceded any physical sense of period. Even more unfortunately, actors appear to fail to find the connection or the direct relationship between open, lifted, expansive body attitudes and similar vocal qualities, the way they are mutally supportive in creating a sense of the heroic, the symbiotic relationship between physical and vocal "rooting" for power.

Actors often appear to avoid audience contact at all costs: even when a solo speech cries out for "confiding" in those in the

house, an actor may stubbornly try to make the soliloquey introspective. With predictable frequency, an actor worried about audience comprehension in a difficult passage, would slow down for emphasis rather than trusting the verse builds and "inherent sound sense". In slowing down, of course, the connection between various parts of a ten line sentence would frequently be lost.

At the end of their first experience, acting Shakespeare most performers see the task as demanding more energy, a bolder level of attack, a more complex balancing of opposing forces, and far more experimentation outside of rehearsal than they had anticipated. The typical performer expresses enormous curiosity as to the feelings of other actors throughout rehearsal, has developed a genuine curiosity about verse as a tool and the Elizabethen world or external matrix of the script. He seems far more likely to view his performance as a series of moments, some of which fill him with enormous satisfaction, some not; he seems quite aware of only partial success based on the sheer magnitude of the script and regrets not starting earlier and working harder on all aspects of his characterization

This awareness of the absolute necessity for individual initiati dominates his advice to other novices who may follow him, not only in terms of active work but inquiry. Others are advised not to be embarrassed by "dumb" questions but to go ahead and ask, to request special sessions with directors to work out blocks, to demand attention from the director and <u>command</u> it from the audience. Actors gene rally expressed growing disillusionment (even if they had been initially charmed) with production elements expressing a kind of eclectic anarchy, radical changes in period, locale, staging conventions, and superimposed interpretations. There appeared to be a growing

tendency to trust the text and to respect traditional Elizabethan style performance.

Actors in this study became more conspicuously homogeneous in perception as experience grew. Novices were more similar to each other in Post than Pretest answers. Those who had experienced two or three Shakespearean performances were more similar still, and all these were clearly moving in the direction of those perceptions offered by the Expert or experienced sampling of actors, who in spite of varying geographical and educational backgrounds were almost (and quite remarkably) identical in their responses to all questions. If these results are generalizable, there appears to be a far more solid base of agreement amongst performers of Shakespeare in the U.S. than there has seemed to be amongst producers, directors, and scholars

A director beginning Shakespeare rehearsals or teacher starting a period styles unit in class might well find a simple sharing of these aforementioned results a considerable reliever of tension and inhibition within his company. Most actors will be soothed and reassured by an awareness of where they stand in comparison to the "average" performer in their position. Administering this questionaire (samples are here for those who would like them) or one of your own design will help you determine the general exposure and emotional climate of your own group and will very likely assist in clarifying early rehearsal objectives. The hour which the actors spend writing should give you a great deal of information.

Two major areas of concern amongst subjects of this study merit further discussion. Both remain largely unresolved in most actors' thoughts, and both influence the whole range of choices a performer must make when he acts Shakespeare. Subjects clearly expected much of Acting Shakespeare to be remote and foreign and this predisposition

often conspicuously inhibited aggressive rehearsal experimentation. Actors also demonstrated an evolving perception of Acting Shakespeare as a "balancing act" which few felt they had "centered" to their satisfaction. This was such a massive preoccupation that more detailed attention should be given to the possibility of equilibrium, even if the balance can never be anything more than delicate.

Some of the more frequent "opposites" introduced as essential in Shakespeare include meaning and music, heroics and humanity, animalism and aethetics, boldness and control, extravagance and restraint, scope and detail. One actor described a desire for his performance to have "some of the earth in it but also some of the stars."

Much of the dramatic literature of the world lodges itself firmly amongst the clouds or in the mud, but Shakespeare is one of the very few writers to keep his feet planted firmly in the earth while his head is in the heavens. It seems reasonable for the actor to do the same. His role of referee is one which he wants neither potential opponent to win nor really lose. He wants them both to make good showings for themselves. Man's guts are viewed with his dreams. A character belches and then sings of sweet cosmic transcendence.

Laurence Olivier has identified this kind of acting in a simple clear description as performance with a top half (music, spirit) and a bottom half (animalism, guts), in which neglect of either results in something incomplete. Olivier maintains that Gielgud has always mastered the top half at the expense of the bottom and that his own tendency has always been the reverse. Most critics would probably agree that his own conscientious development of the half which

is not his inclination has made him the most popular selection of greatest living Shakespearean actor. Ironically, Kenneth Tynan has described the person Olivier in the same terms, as a contradiction, a man who loves ceremony, hierarchy and ritual on the one hand and eccentric, offbeat earthiness on the other. Such a man would seem ideally suited to performance where unity comes through diversity, where a character can break into some vaudeville while breaking his own heart. The performer who can find these elements within himself may be on his way to Acting Shakespeare.

It may also be possible (as several actors have herein suggested) that it is unnecessary for the actor to convey his top and bottom halves simultaneously. Often his challenge could be rapid shifts between the two, sudden reversal instead of impossible balance. One item rarely discussed is the use of verse and prose passages. Since nearly seventy percent of the speeches (and eighty percent of the lines) are set in verse, it seems possible that the playwright intended the other thirty (or twenty) percent for expression of a greater freedom, dipping into the colloquial, dealing with less elevated elements. It is not, of course, that clean and simple, but examination of the texts reveals these passages as earthier, non-ritualistic, and more basic encounters most of the time. Hamlet is not only perhaps the greatest tragic role, but also the closest balance between verse (58% of the lines) and prose (42%), lodged almost directly between the extremes of verse--only roles like Richard II and prose--only parts like Sir Toby Belch, and sharing certain elements with both those characters.

Some potential for actor training in Shakespeare could lie in emphasis on those elements familiar to the actor in order to ease

him into a comfotable relationship with the exotic. Americans have, for example, a form of theatre which extravagantly combines the oratorical and the naturalistic, the representational and presentational, the intimate and the spectacular. It is the musical, the native American theatre art form. Once the observer gets past the comparative simple mindedness of some of its examples plus the inevitable set of culturally-bound details, its similarities to Shakespeare are remarkable and illuminating. Writers have occasionally compared Shakespeare to grand opera, but the bawdy, vulgar farce juxtaposed with the tender "aria" are perhaps more similar to popular musical theatre. As a possible channel or funnel or introduction it has strong possibilities, with its inherent appeal and ready familiarity to the student. Certainly the actor who thinks in terms of pouring his heart out in soliloquy the way he might in a solo number in the musical (instead of treating it as a deadly "set piece" speech) may be on his way to soaring appropriately with that moment.

Other ready similarities between Shakespeare and the musical exist in their enormous casts, scenes of huge public gatherings, and use of pomp and spectacle. Both have great likelihood of a "finale" with all the above involved, plus sharp juxtaposing of such scenes with intimate, private ones. Both shift constantly from acknowledging to ignoring the audience, tend to involve heroic archetypal characters, and are likely to be set in an exotic locale and time period, with a general distancing or romanticizing of the physical world of the play. Both require strong outpouring of intense heart-felt emotion in a straightforward and unembarrassed manner. Neither involves behavior that is much like that of everyday "real" people but rather characters at their brightest and most

intense, expressing themselves in various forms of music.

Americans also have archetypal heroes. The classic is, of course, the cowboy, but history has given space to the self-made Horatio Alger man and the private eye as well. These figures loom larger and stronger than the average man and may be worth employing as introductions to other heroic figures. A major difference lies in the cowboy's restraint, an almost unheard-of Elizabethan trait, and one which most actors in this study at some point identified as getting between themselves and the role. A twentieth century preoccupation with "cool" and with carefully modulated behavior is evident in our mythical figures and current movie box office monarchs. These men are non-verbal; they rarely reveal themselves in any context, but least of all through words. Physical strength, coordination and failure to buckle under pressure are paramount. When these figures let go, it is controlled, a blood bath purging, after which they emerge rigid and intact. Elizabethans wear their hearts and minds in their mouths, and speech is the most prized power of all with vividness of expression the crowning achievement. But they also possess the tougher virtues noted above. Since Americans know very well the strengths of hybrid, melting pot products and certainly prize wit and precision, there is no reason why an acting student cannot combine idols (some current examples: Clint Eastwood and Gore Vidal as one person, Paul Newman and Allistair Cook, Jacqueline Onnassis and Barbara Jordon, infinite humorous mixtures) to match models and connect worlds. The more imaginative may not need such suggestions, but these composites begin to suggest in available images the articulate swagger and poetic strength that characterizes people of Shakespeare.

One of the Experts responding to this survey was observed teaching a group of young actors about verse. First he had them each feel another's pulse and he asked them to think of iambic pentameter as much like the heart beat of living beings, with variations within the metrical structure similar to those caused by variety of emotion and physical activity. He then demonstrated the way in which humans at emotional peaks fall into basic rhythms (anger: "If YOU . . . don't CUT . . . that OUT . . . I'll PUNCH . . . you OUT:" very near tears: "He cameintotheroom, he smiled-andsaidgood-by, and hewasgone," etc.). Actors extemporaneously produced lines from various heightened emotions and then the entire group attempted to determine the metrical patterns into which the speakers had fallen.

By the time the actors began working on scansion from a Shakespearean text a few minutes later, they were exploring something known to them, something similar to the working of their own hearts and the expression of their most intense feelings. Verse was not something remote or artificial. It was a form of human expression.

Without developing categories further, it seems likely that much value exists in finding areas familar to the present day actor (particularly contradictory elements or "double edges" in his own nature) and working from that base. One expert suggested in interview that the present moment may be ideal for such a connection. He pointed out that "taste" has been a sometimes detriment to actors inhabiting Shakespeare's characters, but there is finally at this writing a large citizenry much like the Elizabethans, people who may go to a porno film one evening and a chamber music concert the next, enjoy both, and never bother themselves with something called taste.

A long rehearsal period is clearly necessary to accomplish this awareness, but think of what is being expected of the performers. In addition to all an actor must do in any play, he must successfully change to another century, style, country, culture, and vocabulary. I believe this can best be accomplished by a series of games centered on making this unfamiliar territory seem like home. I will describe one of my favorites and I'm sure you will have no trouble designing many of your own.

This game is called SHAKESPEARE COUNTRY (a country that happens to have 37 "counties"). It is designed to establish the world of the play as no more remote than any isolated territory with its own special "local color". After the actors have played around with what they believe, wear, fear, eat, and hope in Illyria, Arden, Navarre, Inverness (or wherever) the company proceeds to play with how they talk there. A treasure hunt of the script is undertaken for phrases we do not use (but they do) in each of the following arbitrary categories: 1. greetings and good-byes, 2. positive and negative reinforcements, 3. queries and commands, 4. oaths and expletives (a big favorite), 5. qualifiers and interjections, and of course, 6. forms of address. Here is a sample of predominant positive reinforcement from <u>As You Like It</u> and a possible contemporary parelle for each:

"A nimble wit" - "He's no dummy."
"I have been told so of many" - "That's what everyone says."
"Tis very probable" - "I'll bet it is."
"'Tis as thou sayest" - "You're right"
"Most true it is" - "That's for sure."
"Herein I see 'tis so" - "Now I get it."
"I'll stand to 't" - "You got my word on it."
"Well said, that" - "Right on" or "For sure"
"As mine eye doth witness" - "I see it with my own eyes"
"I warrant you" - "I'm not kidding"

"Pray heaven it be so" - "Oh God, I hope so" or "I sure as hell hope so" (We don't tend to be quite so selective as the Elizabethans in calling upon places and things eternal)

Once a basic vocabulary has been established, there are periods within each rehearsal when no one is allowed to speak in any mode but that of this "county", sometimes even on break. Company members are encouraged to interact with each other as they meet on campus away from rehearsal in the same manner. Topics of conversation may be contemporary but language must be Elizabethan. Here is an example:

> "Aye, marry, Friend, couldst spare a quarter? By my troth, if thou wouldst loan me but two bits to procure a Coke, upon mine honor, I shall repay thee ere three days have passed. I tell thee truly, sirrah."

After the actors get reasonably comfortable with this level of repartee, there are more demanding sessions where all communication is restricted to blank verse and if they prove truly adept, an occasional rhymed-couplet-only-day. Another example:

> "A journey to the John,'tis my intent.
> I shall return ere five minutes are spent."

The game is fun, it makes performers comfortable with their actual dialogue, and is particularly helpful in those stretches where Shakespeare calls for crowd reactions but does not say what they are, where ad-libs are definitely needed but the thought of winging his way through improvised Elizabethan verse can easily send your average actor into a state of terminal creative arrest.

Many artists will get nervous during these time consuming acclimation sessions and anxious to get on with the more basic tasks of blocking and business. I believe you will find,however, that attention to these initial orientations will make all later work go more smoothly, that directors will find actors eventually doing a lot of work for them. Most important, the roles have a

better chance of being truly inhabited rather than skirted in their periphery. The process may be less fretful (and strutful) for all concerned.